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ABSTRACT

Some blatant forms of sex discrimination in education have been recognized and addressed in the last decade or so. However, judging both by graduate level counseling textbooks commonly in use and by counselor-educator and counselor-trainee behaviors commonly in practice, enlightenment about the potentially debilitating effects of language is still in order. Language, the most basic tool of communication and counseling, is typically loaded against women. It can trivialize their achievement, lower their aspirations and damage their self-concepts. The negative effects for women of sexist and exclusionary language also affect men. by perpetuating their limited perceptions of and expectations for women. Counselor-educators, ideally marked by high levels of self-awareness and sensitivity, should be leaders in a movement against sexist and exclusionary language. The supposition that children are often literal in their responses to language and grow into adults often unconsciously maintaining the same literal perspectives and usage, is reason enough for counselor-educators, in their texts and through their students, to break the chain. Viable alternatives to sexist, exclusionary language do exist. First, though, counselor-educators must be helped toward empathy with those directly affected by harmful language styles. With recognition of the problems, the solution--use of non-sexist, inclusionary language--requires only principled dedication and practice. (PAS)

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"Physician, Heal Thyself":
LANGUAGE, LIKE AIR, CAN BE UNHEALTHFUL; COUNSELOR-EDUCATORS SHOULD LEAD CLEAN-UP

CG 016601

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Scenes from a counseling class:

* The prof, a counselor-educator: "Now, I want you gals in that group to . . . ."

* The text, ostensibly a helper of helpers: "whenever an individual acts, he is presumably trying to satisfy some . . . need. If the counselor can recognize the need, he can help find appropriate ways of meeting it."[1]

* The grad student, a counselor-in-training: She reads a report replete with "he" and "his"; apparently she herself is the only woman at all involved in the counseling process.

If these examples were part of a consciousness-raising or sensitivity exercise, the question would be: what, in the enlightened 80's, is wrong with each one? And the answer, to this sometimes-counseling student, is that each scene illustrates both sexist or exclusionary language - as well as the debilitating effects for women and men of that ubiquitous language.

Like all people, counselors have blind spots. But the hope is that they work against their perceived biases and areas of

ignorance. For those counselors and counselor-educators who saw nothing wrong in the earlier scenes, and for those always open to new ideas, this article will attempt to demonstrate that language - the most basic tool of communication and counseling - is typically loaded against women, to the ultimate detriment of women and men alike. The good news, though, is that the language inequities discussed here can be neutralized, to benefit both sexes. Gentle counselor-educators and counselor-trainees, read on . . .

SEXIST LANGUAGE

" . . . Ella Grasso recalls a bumper sticker distributed by her opponent . . . which read: 'Can Connecticut afford a governess?'"[2] Reader, meet sexist language: Student, meet a put-down. (What connotations are suggested by "governess" - with its coined feminine ending especially damning in this context - compared with "governor"? Think too of "lady doctor," rather than the neutral "doctor.") As discussed by Lerner (1976), sexist language is trivializing in effect. Marked by euphemism, it perpetuates the socialization of and cultural expectations for women. Consider, for instance, the prevalence of "girl" or "lady" in reference to females of any age or status, while "boy" is studiously avoided. And yet, does a "girl" run for Congress or win a Nobel prize?

A staff psychologist at the Menninger Clinic, Lerner points out in the article cited (and reinforces in numerous other

writings) that "woman," "lady," "girl" (and gal!) are not interchangeable word choices and that "one's choice of language reflects one's unconscious assumptions."

But ignorance of the law - or of the unconscious - is no defense. Counselors, of all people, dare not reinforce language patterns which implicitly suggest frivolousness and and lack of seriousness in connection with women.

Describing a counselor renewal workshop, Thomas, Moore and Sams (1980) underlined the urgent need for counselor awareness of sex bias in their own behaviors. To their surprise, many counselor-participants came to recognize subtle verbal behaviors that were indeed biased. Further, they realized that both women and men are affected (i.e., harmed) by sex-biased counseling.

Sex-biased verbal behaviors . . . well-meaning counselors who don't know better . . . Surely, bias-free language is the bottom line of fair and effective counseling.

The need for non-sexist language was convincingly argued by Miller and Swift (1977), and the practical ways to achieve that were recently detailed by the same authors (1980). The International Association of Business Communicators (1977) has effectively addressed the same issue.

More specifically for counselors, among 13 "principles concerning the counseling and therapy of women," Division 17 of the American Psychological Association advocates that "Counselors/

therapists use non-sexist language in counseling/therapy, supervision, teaching and journal publications." (1978) Okun's (1976) text beautifully models non-sexist, inclusionary language, and Foxley's (1979) text is a welcome reflection of the awarenesses and concerns necessary today.

INCLUSIONARY VS EXCLUSIONARY

The case has been made against use of the traditional "generic" masculine words, purportedly including women - but it has not been won, as random excerpts from countless texts, other books and periodicals readily prove. However, Johnson and Kelly's (1975) perspective - that of "inclusionary" vs. "exclusionary" language - is particularly persuasive. Arguing that one style of language (inclusionary) hurts neither men nor women, while the other style (exclusionary) does harm women, they use the analogy of two prescription drugs identical in their curative powers and differing only in that one has no possible harmful side effects (it's neutral; inclusionary), while the other might adversely affect its users (it's potentially negative; exclusionary): why take chances, they ask.

If it's so that children take language literally (i.e., "policeman" excludes the possibility of a woman's being a police officer), and that they're unsure when to move from literal usage to recognition of gender-generic usage, why use gender-generic at all? Adults - who after all began as children with the same possible misconceptions - are subject to the same

uncertainties, however unconsciously they may now be felt.

EFFECT OF LANGUAGE

How positive about herself can a woman graduate student feel when regularly called a "girl," when regularly reading books filled with generic "he"? How high can her professional aspirations be when most all counseling professionals are "he's" - to judge by commonly used language patterns? How much an equal part of her classes can she feel when - whether or not she even knows it - she (and her male classmates) have picked up countless routine negative cues about women?

Instead of using the exclusionary "gender-generic" nouns and pronouns (he, man, fireman, chairman, "Dear Sir" . . .) which are harmful in effect if not in intent, and instead of adopting the equally exclusionary reversal, "gender-specific" style (chairwoman, Congresswoman, spokeswoman, "Dear Madam" . . .) harmful both in intent and in effect - Johnson and Kelly advocate neutral, inclusionary language (humans, not mankind; he/she or s/he, not he; mail carrier; chairperson, "Dear Editor" . . .).

Inclusionary language - how cumbersome! some might argue. Not if the principle is worth it. Our ears become used to what we hear and say.

> Most sensitive people manage to describe our national religious traditions as "Judeo-Christian," even though it takes a few seconds longer to say than "Christian." So why is it such a hardship to

say "he or she" instead of "he"?[3]

POOH-POOH AT YOUR PERIL

It's easy enough for those not excluded by language styles to pooh-pooh the need for inclusionary language. Counselor-educators who do so, though, might practice their empathic skills - and necessarily see things from the other side - by working through Wells' brilliant "Woman - Which Includes Man, of Course."

Just how deeply embedded is exclusionary language? Ms. magazine cites a familiar academic example: "Next time some guy tells you how trivial feminists are to care about the gender of titles, ask him how he would feel if he graduated from college and was awarded a Spinster of Arts degree, went on to earn a Mistress of Arts or Science, and then had to work hard for a Sistership."[4]

THE PROBLEM

While recognition of sex-role stereotyping is now comparatively commonplace among counselors, and while still other formerly glaring sex-related inequities (the special counseling needs of re-entry women students; the discrimination inherent in some vocational aptitude inventories; the broadened vocational counseling necessary for young women . . .) have been addressed or remediated, the very real, very pervasive and very basic problem of sexism in language - from counselor-educators, through counseling texts, to counselor-trainees influenced by both

teachers and texts - remains . . . and is perpetuated.

In a service field whose paramount mission must be to help others toward self-understanding and self-acceptance, sexism in language is now an unconscionable anachronism.

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